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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SERBIA: DEFENSE MINISTER MAKES LANDMARK VISIT

REF: BELGRADE 1641, BELGRADE 1482

Summary

1. The Serbian Defense Minister made a landmark visit to Southern Serbia (Presevo Valley), December 13-14, and had positive meetings with the ethnic Albanian mayors of Presevo and Bujanovac. The Minister and the mayors agreed that, although serious tensions remained, the situation in Southern Serbia was stable. The mayors expressed their usual concerns about the presence of security forces in the region but stressed that the local Albanian population would remain engaged with Belgrade and resolve problems through political means. This was the first meeting between a Serbian Defense Minister and the local leaders in many years and represents a positive step forward for engagement between Belgrade and Southern Serbia. End Summary.

Local Mayors Constructive and Engaged

2. Serbian Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac called on the Albanian mayors of Presevo and Bujanovac while touring the army bases in the "Ground Safety Zone" between Serbia and Kosovo. Sutanovac, who also serves as vice president of President Tadic's Democratic Party (DS), met with Presevo Mayor Ragmi Mustafa on December 13 and Bujanovac Mayor Nagip Arifi on December 14.

3. The meetings were historic and constructive. Serbian ministers rarely travel to Southern Serbia and almost never meet with local Albanian mayors. Both Arifi and Mustafa told poloff that they told Sutanovac Southern Serbia was "stable" and that local Albanians were committed to peaceful engagement with Belgrade. In Presevo, Mustafa said the Serbian Army's presence in the region was acceptable, but raised usual concerns about the Interior Ministry's Gendarmerie (i.e. "unnecessary" deployments). Mustafa, seeing Sutanovac as a senior GOS politician as well as Defense Minister, also raised "softer" issues that he said were linked to stability (the need for Albanian-language higher education, doctors, improved access to health-care, and greater investment from Belgrade). In Bujanovac, Arifi told poloff he and Sutanovac talked mostly about military and security issues and that he was "generally pleased" with the meeting. According to the mayors and press reports, Sutanovac stressed that the Army's presence was to protect citizens from incursion by foreign groups rather than targeted at the local population. Sutanovac told the press that he and the local leaders agreed that there were "no threats to stability" in the south.

Comment

4. This is a very positive step for the relationship between Belgrade and Southern Serbia. Sutanovac and the mayors showed

leadership by meeting and pragmatically discussing the local impact of Serbia's security policy. His visit rewards the moderate, constructive messages by Arifi and Mustafa and represents the hope for a normalized relationship between the GOS and its Albanian citizens. It is significant that both the Minister and the mayors agreed that, although tensions remained, the region was stable and they recognized the need for open communication. Reinforcement of the message that the Presevo Valley will remain in Serbia would be very helpful coming from Pristina and Tirana. End Comment.

MUNTER